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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the development of an outdoor education camp that assists young people in recognizing new responsibilities and celebrating transition into young adulthood. Using the concept of initiation, the camp marked the beginning of a process which involved adolescents in developing an identity as young adults, increasing personal responsibility, and strengthening personal and group support networks. Students entering upper secondary school participated in the "rites of passage," an initiation process which took place during a 5-day camping trip on the southwest coast of Australia. Key components were based on traditional practices and included the role of elders as guides and mentors, the symbolic journey, physical and psychological challenges, the creation of a vision of self and place, responsibility for self and others, support through networks, reintegration into the school community, and the sharing of experiences through school publications. The outdoor education initiation process could be applied to other settings, including work with troubled youth. (SAS)

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Initiation: The Rights of Passage into Young Adulthood

By Leisa Thompson, Tim Battersby & Andrew Lee

Abstract

Adventure therapy is often reactive. We wanted to develop a process that is proactive. Our rationale was: why wait until there is a problem? We wanted to offer a process to all our students rather than waiting until they are identified as 'at risk' and requiring intervention.

This paper is not meant to be a theoretical interpretation. Rather, it is a practical account of our experience in developing a process to assist young people in recognising their new responsibilities as Senior students and formally celebrate the start of their transition into young adulthood with the guidance and support of adult elders.

Introduction

Three years ago we had the beginnings of an idea. We wanted to run a camp for our Year 11 students that would be both meaningful and useful for them as they made the transition from Lower to Upper Secondary School. It seemed to us that Year 11 marked a major milestone in the lives of our students. They were moving into young adulthood and embarking on academic programmes that would affect the opportunities available to them in the years to come. How could we help them develop the skills and resources that would enable them to make the most of their final two years at school? We came up with the concept of Initiation - one that would mark the beginning of a process which involved development of an identity as young adults, increasing personal responsibility and the growth of personal and group support networks. We wanted this to be a holistic process where traditional wisdom was interwoven with personal challenge. This article documents not only the process we developed but also our own journey in developing it.

You may ask, "why use initiation as a process?" Adolescence is a time of rapid growth and change. It is a time of transformation both physically and cogitatively. Cultures vary in their attitudes towards adolescents and in the practices they adopt for marking the boundary between childhood and adulthood. In many traditional societies initiation serves as such a marker. Maddern, (1990) argues that Australian Aboriginal

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initiations provide a framework that is relevant to today's youth. "Kids need opportunities to test their limits, discover their strengths, learn how the world was made, find out where they fit in, recognise their responsibilities to the Earth and to society, and to participate actively in and with their community." We believe such an opportunity was lacking in both the school curriculum and often in the wider society.

Adolescents also often participate in "initiatory rites" in an informal way; rites that are often risky in nature and ones that often involve no guidance by adults. They sometimes drink excessively, use drugs, drive fast and participate in activities that are guided by peer pressure. Tacey (1995) argues that these modern secular rituals end up being mostly destructive both to society and to the individual participants. We wanted to provide them an alternative, safe environment for discovering their adult roles and personal boundaries.

In Western society the transition to adulthood is a process which spans many years and is marked by physical maturation, cognitive development and personality development. The transition to adulthood is not sudden but develops as adolescents move through these developmental stages.

Erickson, (1968) argues that the major crisis of adolescence is the search for a meaningful identity. In order to resolve this crisis adolescents need to:

1. Select a set of personal values and beliefs.
2. Formulate a personality style which incorporates their unique qualities, dispositions and ways of relating to others.
3. Discover a niche in the outside world into which to slot their newfound self.

The initiation process we have developed does not intend for students to suddenly become 'adults' but rather offers them opportunities for physical challenge, self reflection, for clarifying their own beliefs and values and for finding meaningful ways to incorporate these into their roles as upper school students and young adults. We encourage them to view their transition into adulthood as a process, with the initiation ceremony being but one marker along the way. We encourage them to accept responsibility for themselves and their study and to assume leadership roles within the school and the community.

The Process

In developing the initiation process we identified a number of key components that appear in traditional initiation practices but also had significance in today's context. The headings we use are similar to those proposed by Maddern, (1990).

The role of elders.

We conceptualised our roles as leaders as those of guides and mentors. Knudtson and Suzuki, (1992) describe the role of elders as facilitators, or guides, rather than simply as instructors." Their role is to point people toward their rituals and growth processes that might help them become more aware of themselves as well as of the natural world and their place within it." Philip and Hendry, (1996) in their study on young people and mentoring describes mentoring as a "one to one relationship between an adult and a young person where the older, experienced mentor provides support advice and

challenge." In developing the role of elders in our context we have attempted to synthesise these two definitions. We do not purport to have all the answers to life's questions but we do have our own life experiences to draw on and as elders we are prepared to share these with the young people we work with. Our role is to help our students learn about themselves and the world they find themselves in. We facilitate the process of learning but ultimately the learning comes from within the student in an experiential way.

There are a number of roles which our Elders play in the camp process. Prior to the camp, several subgroups coordinate planning logistical arrangements, researching and compiling updated versions of student and staff workbooks. All of the leaders met regularly to discuss the itinerary, process, workbooks, the group and various philosophical considerations. During the camp adult leaders operate as family group leaders for about eight students. This role allows regular meaningful discussion and reflection time to be shared amongst the group. Information about the itinerary, process and valuable feedback from the day's activities is discussed. One of the most critical roles of our Elders is to provide role models of attitudes and behaviours. During adventure activities, Elders act as facilitators of philosophical discussions. After the camp Elders provide an ongoing support network for the students back at school.

The selection of staff for the camp was of paramount importance. We developed the following criterion for choosing elders to participate in the initiation process.

1. They must be experienced in working in adventure settings and be aware of correct procedures, aware of their roles and responsibilities and their own limitations.
2. They must be willing to participate in the activities presented to the students.
3. They must be willing to explore their own potential and that of others in the group.
4. They must be prepared not to impose their own values but rather encourage the sharing of ideas and experiences.
5. They have the following characteristics: non judgmental, good listening skills, be caring, respectful, fun, friendly and open, and confident they can provide a safe and supportive environment for the students.
6. They need to be prepared to support each other and work as a team to resolve conflict and solve problems.
7. They must be prepared to offer ongoing support to students after the camp within the school context.

The symbolic journey.

The journey we take our students on is twofold. In traditional Initiations young initiates are often taken away from their families to journey to sacred places where ancient wisdom is passed on, challenges are faced and new responsibilities are acknowledged. We take our students away from home for five days to camp at Margaret River, a beautiful and picturesque setting on the southwest coast of Western Australia. It is renown for its rugged coastline, beautiful beaches and stands of Karri forest and a place where our initiates can reconnect with the power and wonder of the natural world. We also take them on a symbolic journey, which encompasses their childhood experiences, their adolescence and their transition into young adulthood. This journey is facilitated by

a rich use of metaphor. Gass, (1991) describes the usefulness of metaphoric transfer to facilitate behaviour change during an activity rather than relying on the debriefing process to produce insight and change. We use the metaphor of the school community being analogous to being a member of a tribe. This metaphor is used to explore our interconnectedness to one another and to enhance the individuals role and responsibility to each other and the group.

Various adventure activities provide the vehicle for delivering different life lessons (e.g., responsibilities to the earth and each other). The setting and rising of the sun mark the symbolic transition from childhood to young adulthood. Each student is given time for personal reflection and time to process their experiences with the group as they move through each stage of the process.

The challenge.

Initiations involve physical and psychological challenge. By providing a series of adventure challenges throughout the camp the students are encouraged to explore their physical and emotional selves. Boranup forest provides the setting for students to discover their potential, to reconnect with the earth and to recognise their responsibility to preserving the natural world. Contos Beach is the venue for identifying their personal strengths, their roles and responsibilities, for appreciating each other's talents and differences. It is the time to explore the components of group success and the role each plays in that. It is a time for personal empowerment and an opportunity to experience the power and beauty of the sea. Giants Cave provides students with a peak adventure experience. They learn to trust each other, support each other, and manage physical and psychological risk. They experience both the fear and elation of successfully abseiling down the cave's solution pipes. They explore their limits. Golgotha Cave is a journey into the underworld to marvel at the beautiful formations, which have taken thousands of years to create. Here students face an initiative, which requires teamwork and persistence to solve.

Even the most resistant groups bond together to complete the challenge and experience group success. It is also a time to explore their psychological selves with opportunities to share their innermost experiences, fears and successes. It is an opportunity to finish unfinished business within the group and to ask for support and nurturance for the journey ahead.

Creating a vision.

As we become more aware of ourselves and our place in the world, we realise that we each have an important part to play and that we are responsible for how we play it. Victor Frankl describes it as "Everyone has their own specific vocation or mission in life... Therein they cannot be replaced, nor can their life be repeated. Thus, everyone's task is as unique as is their specific opportunity to implement it." People need a vision of where they are going and a mission to make their lives meaningful. As a school community we have these articulated in our vision and mission statements. As part of the initiation process we provide the opportunity for students to develop their own personal vision and mission statements and to consider how these can be enacted in their own lives and their lives as part of the school community.

Responsibility.

Throughout the initiation process responsibility is a key thread. Throughout the camp the students are given opportunities to take responsibility for themselves and each other. This begins with the development of a behaviour code for the camp, which is negotiated between all the participants, both students and elders. The code developed provides respect and safety for each group member. Students are also introduced to the Full Value Contract. This is a contract they make with themselves and each other to work together as a group to meet both individual and group goals, to adhere to safety procedures and to give and receive positive and negative feedback where appropriate. The goal of the Full Value Contract is to pass responsibility to the initiates for regulating their behaviour, participation and experiences. We also offer students Challenge by Choice. Each student can determine their own level of participation and challenge within the activities offered. It does not mean they can opt out of activities all together but rather it offers them a safety net to identify their minimum level of involvement. It encourages the group to respect each person's individual differences and to provide support to each other in achieving their goals.

After the first camp students began to expect to be treated like adults without any change or extra responsibility on their own part. We now place more emphasis on the fact that becoming an adult is not an automatic ritual or a right, but rather a status that has to be earned.

Support.

Throughout the initiation process we encourage students to develop support networks which will last after the camp. This is a multi-layered process. Firstly all the elders are chosen because they will not only support the students as initiates but also make themselves available to students once they return to the school community. In camp students are divided randomly into family groups. At least one elder is assigned to each family. The idea is that you can choose your friends but not your family. It is in these groups that the initiates experience each of the challenges. The initiates learn to get on with each other, solve problems and experience success with a group of people they might otherwise not have chosen. Each student also chooses a buddy with whom to share the highs and lows of their experience with. Time is set aside each day for families and buddies to meet. This enables the development of relationships and networks which last not only on the return to school but beyond.

Reintegration.

We have found many students have powerful experiences while away on camp and as a result it is important that they are reintegrated into the school community in a supportive way. The first step is to brief/debrief their parents. When the students arrive back at school their parents are invited to a meeting where the camp is discussed, outlining the activities they have participated in and the outcomes of these. Any problems encountered are discussed and the student's achievements are celebrated. Parents are also given some practical ways of supporting their children in their new roles as young adults within the school.

Context.

Support is also offered to the parents should any problems with their student arise. The teaching staff is also briefed about the camp and the outcomes experienced by the students. We encourage our staff to utilise tools such as the Full Value Contract in their classrooms and to support the students in taking responsibility for their study and conduct. On returning to school students are able to share their camp experiences either by contributing to a camp newsletter or to the school magazine. Ideally students are offered ongoing opportunities to meet as a group to explore and expand their adult roles.

What We Have Learned

We first ran this camp three years ago. We knew we had a great idea but we did not know how it would work. Since that first camp we have been on a learning curve sometimes steeper than others. We have continually evaluated our program and modified and improved it from year to year. We have changed our accommodation from comfortable dormitory style to camping out with few facilities on a sheep farm. We have developed comprehensive safety procedures, which are now documented in a manual for staff. We have developed staff training for new staff participating on camp. We have dealt with numerous logistical problems caused by an increasing number of participants. We have refined our concept and in turn refined the activities we offer as part of the program. We have rethought and resequenced. We found the students had heaps of support but as a staff we had very little so we have incorporated structured staff briefing and debriefing as part of our process. In the first two years we found an increase in the counselling load after the camp as students attempted to take on adult roles in their families and at school. This has led us to emphasise that becoming an adult is a long process, with the initiation camp being only one step along the way. The passage into adult is not an automatic right but one that has to be earned. We have developed workbooks for staff and students. We have talked and read and talked some more. We have come to appreciate the uniqueness of each group of initiates and have learnt to avoid making comparisons between the students from each year, recognising instead that each experience is highly personal and different.

Future directions.

The initiation process as described has been specifically designed and implemented to fulfil the requirements of our school setting but it could be easily adapted to provide a meaningful experience in any number of other settings (e.g., adventure programs in the private sector, with troubled youth, or other school settings). The program could also be expanded to include an extended vision quest, more time for personal reflection and time for dealing with specific issues pertaining to males and females, (i.e., men and women's business.) In the future we hope to expand and extend our original process to incorporate these ideas. We have found this program to be a worthwhile and exciting venture and this is encapsulated in the following words from one of the elders on this year's camp: "We have planted the seeds in all the students' minds and souls. Some of these seeds have germinated initially and grown rapidly. Others will lie dormant until the right time comes. Others will germinate and grow slowly after camp once the student has had time away to think. So few young people have this opportunity for their beginning of adulthood, to be

recognised, acknowledged, celebrated and given significance and support with ceremony. The process is exciting, new and interesting to them and opens up a new world. It's amazing to watch the process develop."

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